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East L.A. Mural 'A Story of Our Struggle' Endangered

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by [Ed Fuentes \(http://www.kcet.org/user/profile/efuentes\)](http://www.kcet.org/user/profile/efuentes)

on March 16, 2012 2:15 PM

If it is not one mural under fire, it's another.

A mural in East Los Angeles that's credited as a starting point for the Chicano Mural Art Movement is endangered by development, warns the [Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles](#).

[\(/https://www.facebook.com/muralconservancy\)](https://www.facebook.com/muralconservancy)

The threatened art is "A Story of Our Struggle," a 1974 installation made of 17 sections forming 19 ceramic tile panels and fronts the former home of the First Street Store.

The neighborhood said goodbye to the beloved independent department store in 2007, which shuttered after servicing East Los Angeles since 1924. Now the site, at E. First Street and Towne, is eyed by Pacific Charter Schools to house a new Arts Magnet, learned MCLA who quickly informed the original artists.

Don Juan, a.k.a. Johnny D. González, first headed the project during turbulent times in East Los Angeles. He first presented the mural as part of a concept to then First Street Store owner Robert Kemp in 1970, as a way to enhance the commercial street as a cultural marker.

The artist presented Kemp a sketch showing murals framed with arches, a nod to European countries he visited, and inspired by the set of 1966 murals by Mexican artist Jose Reyes Meza installed on the Pan American Bank, located on the next corner.

The idea was discussed, but was left undecided due to the Chicano Moratorium walkouts, marches, and protests that raised tensions in the neighborhood - accented further when L.A. Times columnist Ruben Salazar was killed by L.A. County Sheriffs on August 29, 1970.

"Then 4 years later, I got a call from Bob saying 'I have a Christmas present for you,' " recalls González. He met with Kemp and was shown an architectural rendering for new storefront that adapted his mural concept, complete with arches. Chuckling as he thought back to his surprised reaction that the project had moved forward, González says he recalled thinking "Man. Now I have to fill them."

Robert Arenivar and David Botello helped complete the design, then the architect firm sent the art to Mexico to be converted into ceramic tiles by Joel Suro Olivares.

The final set of panels trace Mexican-American heritage beginning in ancient pre-Columbian Mexico with "The Cultivation of Civilization," "The Invention of Arts and Sciences," representing 3000 BC to 1329 AD. In what is a 1974-era urban contemporary interpretation of Chicano, "Man's Struggle With Technology" marks the timeline as 1974 to infinity, and ends with "Hope for Tomorrow" that's dated 2000 to infinity.

"They are one of the very first comprehensive stories from the Chicano Movement," says González.

His previous work, the 1971 "The Birth Of Our Art," was recently retrieved after being stored away for 30 years to be featured at "Mapping Another L.A.: The Chicano Art Movement" at UCLA's Fowler Museum for Pacific Standard Time.

Also significant is that "A Story of our Struggle" may be one of the first Chicano-themed murals created by local artists as a commissioned public art project in collaboration with business owner and architectural firm.



http://www.kcet.org/social/departures/landofsunshine/DSC_7671.JPG

A Story of Our Struggle at E. First and Towne in East Los Angeles | Photo courtesy MCLA

Yet, it's not just the mural at risk, said González. So is his original dream to shape that commercial leg as a cultural destination. "We hoped to create a Civic Center anchored by the popular First Street Store," he said, before suggesting the idea that has revisited independently by others to attract retail and business to the commercial corridor, which

itself is now struggling.

The developer, Pacific Charter Schools, inquired about building in June 2011 and began the permitting process later in November. The artists were only contacted after they learned that the building may not keep the tiled images, stated Irma Nuñez, educator and Business Manager/Archivist for González, who with David Botello and original business partner Jose Luis González, are working together to save the mural. The building itself may be replaced with a design leaving First Street staring at a solid wall and minimal windows.

As for the mural, developers told the artists that it is cost prohibitive to save the facade and keep the murals in place, complicated by a slow permit process that prevents construction to be completed in time, according to Nuñez.

The collective were offered the opportunity to create a new piece, or have access to the wall to recover the current panels, she adds.

A representative for Pacific Charter Schools was contacted, but unavailable to reply to questions.

"They should stay intact . . . on that corner," said González firmly, adding the renewed interest in Los Angeles murals has international tourists visiting the corner.

The local murals can be a field trip destination, substituting for the lack of art and ethnic history educational curriculum, argued Nuñez.

It may be symbolic that this mural about struggle has two area moratoriums as bookends: a national Chicano Movement and the mural moratorium nearby in the city limits. That wasn't lost on the project manager.

"We may have to add another panel," said González.

Pictured above is panel 7, 8, 9 of "A Story of Our Struggle" (1974) by Don Juan / Johnny D. González (project concept, architectural design, theme, and mural design), Robert Arenivar and David Botello (mural design), Joel Suro Olivares (ceramics) and Jose Luis González (partner). This project was created through TELASOMAF (The East Los Angeles School of Mexican American Fine Arts) and Goez Art Studio and Gallery.

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